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ABSTRACT

The author contends that within executive government, which already has all the information it needs to make decisions, program evaluation is seen as a symbolic rather than a substantive enterprise. If it is assumed that program evaluation is an end of policy, not a means, the reasons for government investment in evaluation include: (1) no choice; (2) the only alternative is consultation with organized stakeholders with conflicting agendas (3) it keeps critics occupied; (4) the presence of specialist evaluators discourages non-specialist scrutiny of a program; (5) it buys time to defuse the concern that made the program investment necessary; (6) it will discourage subversive behavior within the funded constituency; (7) it signals the executive's openness to evidence; (8) it is sure to be rendered innocuous; or (9) someone else may fund an evaluation of their program. Executives use various strategies for downplaying evaluation, and the use of case studies has many appealing features in this regard; but, executives are turning away from case study methodology because case study evaluators are able to construct vindicative portrayals of a program, frequently questioning the adequacy of the policy formulation. (BW)

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MANDARINS AND LEMONS - THE EXECUTIVE INVESTMENT IN PROGRAM EVALUATION*

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Even evaluators, an occupational group not over-given to self-doubt, are beginning to wonder about the precise nature of their utility to the agencies of government that continue to endow them. That the seeds of doubt should be slow to germinate is not surprising; growth industries are rare enough these days and evaluation, that most instrumental and utilitarian of research concepts, is undoubtedly thriving. The European Community is the latest super-bureaucracy to endorse program evaluation, a decision guaranteed to further stimulate the fashion among its member states during the coming years. As governments everywhere become more and more interventive in the search for a successful socio-economic formula, their executives are called upon to provide more reliable evidence of the impact of investments than can be gleaned from newspapers or from program beneficiaries. They are also called upon to quell civic anxiety about the dangers and costs of centrism. Evaluators offer not only a specialised information service about the impact of programs, but visible testimony to the disinterested rationality of executive action. Government acts, evaluators report, government reacts on the basis of the information that evaluators provide.

Only it doesn't happen. We know that. McLaughlin exposed the delusion in 1975 with regard to Title I evaluation, Clark Abt confirmed and generalised it in 76. My own experience of government

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funded program evaluation in Britain and in Europe leads me to the same conclusion. So here we have in evaluation a classic example of what in bureacratese is known as an "ongoing zero utility activity". And we evaluators are content it seems to go on playing this game of mandarins and lemons. For much the same reasons that explain the neglect of our products we ignore the results of our own meta-evaluation. Bad news is no news. We have our own eco-system to maintain, and its evident compatibility with the eco-system of the public bank managers means that we must in fact be serving some useful purpose, difficult though it be to discern.

Dare we look closer, and even more sceptically, at the nature of this utility? It might be prudent, if only as an exercise in contingency planning. It could be argued, and I will, that within the introverted culture of executive government, which already has all the information it needs to exploit what little decision space it enjoys, program evaluation is seen as a symbolic rather than a substantive enterprise. I don't mean to suggest that evaluation reports are not de rigueur - they are clearly an essential feature of the interior decor of any self-respecting agency, and their absence is guaranteed to raise an eyebrow or two. Although the demand for delivery of these reports can be simply explained in terms of the internal accountability structure of the bureaucracy, we are sometimes deluded by it into thinking that our sponsors are immobilised by ignorance, unable to take the next policy initiative until they have devoured and digested our findings. We are then puzzled when, having delivered, nothing follows. We wait a while, then make a polite enquiry, only to be reassured that the matter is in hand, in trays, in channels, or in a queue for attention. Further enquiries, less polite, eventually elicit the news that the evaluation was not of a kind that the agency can effectively make use of for a variety of reasons that may or may not be specified. Not to worry, however, there is good news. Would the evaluator consider another contract for program evaluation?

So what's the name of the game in which evaluation reports are sought after but unread? Is evaluation just a bit of administrative chic, the mandarin's coffee table accessory? No, that doesn't quite fit the experience, puzzling though it remains. But it is hardly less plausible than the myths of rational engineering that have shaped our assumptions above the nature and needs of our sponsors.

Most of the programs we evaluate, at least on my side of the Atlantic, appear in the guise of exploratory efforts to respond to a recognised need for services. They are seen as provisional, and subject to further development and refining, because the structure of the problem is not fully known and therefore the adequacy of the response requires monitoring. The provisionality of the program is the key to the evaluative mission; better understanding of the need and an accurate assessment of shortfalls in the response will lead to more effective executive action.

But what if we are totally wrong in these presumptions of bureaucratic intent, despite our sponsors' rhetoric and assurances to the contrary? What if the programs and program evaluations are ends, not means, terminal decisions that constitute a resolution of a policy problem rather than the scouting mission we so fondly imagine? We are after all talking about agencies whose problem is to manage the legislature, whose view of the problems of society is constructed at one highly skewed remove from its citizenry, whose success and even survival depends upon a judicious responsiveness to the pendulum of a power game dominated by short-term advantage. Surely it is ludicrous to suppose that a posture of open-ended inquiry could be anything more than a mere posture in such circumstances.

For the sake of argument, and hopefully of illumination, let us assume that program evaluation is an end of policy, not a means, and let us unfold the logic that might reasonably(?) be construed to follow from it. It may help to explain our rather schizoid feeling of being wanted but not needed.

Why invest in evaluation in the first place?

1. No choice (legislation, regulation, orders, pressure, earmarked funds).

2. The only alternative may be an unacceptable level of consultation with and participation by organised stakeholders with conflicting agendas.

3. It keeps potential or proven critics harmlessly occupied.

4. The presence of specialist evaluators discourages or at least postpones non-specialist and more penetrating scrutiny of the program.

5. It buys time, time for the executive to defuse the concern that made the program investment necessary.

6. The executive may require, especially in the early phases of the program, a reasonable level of implementation, and the evaluation presence will discourage subversive behaviour within the funded constituency.

7. It signals, to those who harbour doubts, the executive's willingness to learn, concern for effectiveness, openness to evidence.

8. It is safe, sure to be rendered innocuous by a combination of epistemological frailty, social unpopularity and evaluator self-interest.

9. The best reason of all - somebody else may fund an evaluation of their program.

The Executive Shopper - Evaluation Brand Preferences

The wise executive, shopping for a suitable evaluation study, is particularly attracted by:

1. A publicised rhetoric of independence combined with a prudential docility in practice. Institutions are more reliable than individuals in this respect, academies preferrable to private firms if the first criterion has primacy. An ideal location is the impoverished academy that by continuous patronage and generous overheads can quickly be shaped to meet the formula.

2. A recommendatory report, which makes the evaluation dismissable as only one of many possible points of view, or legitimating if the recommendations coincide with executive intent at the point of delivery.

3. Esoteric simplism in the conception and analysis of data (esotericism confines confident understanding to the social science community, simplism ensures the invalidiation of the data by those competing for the next round of investments).

4. A willingness to provide in confidence the kind of field intelligence that will improve executive judgement of what they can get away with (e.g. the attitudes and intentions of feared pressure groups).

Mandarins and lemons - The countenance of negative utility

The wise executive avoids would-be evaluators who:

1. Have contacts with the legislative branch or with higher levels in the bureaucracy, thus undermining their control of feed-back to the policy arena.

2. Decline to adopt an insider's view of the problems of executive action.

3. Regard the executive either personally or institutionally, as evaluable choices between alternatives.

4. Have ready access to the press and journalistic skills.

5. Adopt a non-recommendatory approach but will be in a position to comment publicly on executive response to the evaluation.

6. Take seriously the public rhetoric of executive intents - "rationality", "disinterest", "visibility", "service".

The springs of executive recoil - game strategies of downplay

Not all executive shoppers are wise, and not all evaluators understand their role sufficiently to avoid embarrassing the sponsor from time to time. Errors occur on both sides, ruffling feathers all round. But most of the conflict that does arise between evaluators and their executive sponsors revolves around an inescapable difficulty that program evaluators typically encounter, the scarcity of vindicative data. By vindicative data I mean data that support the view that the executive has done enough and done it well. With the best will in the world, and however hard they try, evaluators keep amassing and reporting indicative data, expressive of missed targets and unfulfilled needs. Fortunately the experienced executive can call upon a repertoire of strategies for coping with this problem.

1. The executive can do its best, usually by continuous negotiation of focus, to ensure that the evaluation does not yield information it might be compelled to act upon, or information that could be used against it.

2. To this end the executive will want to ensure that the discourse of evaluation is either different from its own (epistemologically irreconcilable) or, if similar, less comprehensive (insufficient for decision-making).

3. Should the evaluation avoid these snares, the executive can adopt an inert stance, avoiding further participation in the evaluation process or response to it.

4. It may also seek to delay the evaluation by the escalation of demand upon it, seek private ownership of the product, decline to publish it or support its dissemination.

5. The executive may try to provoke the evaluator into behaviour which would cast doubt upon the objectivity of his work or which would constitute breach of faith or breach of contract.

6. The executive can use the evaluation report selectively to minimise further obligation to the constituency supposedly served by the program.

And so to case study

These executive strategies for downplaying evaluation are well known to me. As Helen Simons suggests in her presentation executive confidence in the case study brand of program evaluation has been badly dented by recent experience. I find this difficult to understand. After all, the case study approach has many appealing features. It is academically controversial and therefore can be intellectually assassinated at any time should the need arise. The distribution of its products is easy to control, since they tend towards length and complexity, and are therefore expensive to duplicate and unpopular with publishers. They are also difficult to abstract or summarise and so are unsuited to mass media adaptation. The approach is attractively flexible, an important quality in the event of executive failure to anticipate sub-optimal lines of inquiry. Collective responsibility for case studies is uncommon, and the individualised nature of responsibility for case reports combined with the inescapable element of personal influence in the process and product make it much easier to devalue a particularly threatening product. Two further selling points of case study evaluation should also be noted. Case study workers stick close to the people and activities of the funded constituency and so make very effective policemen, keeping the beneficiaries in line. They are also, by virtue of this proximity, ideally placed to gather the kind of political intelligence which is of value to the executive. All in all case study appears to be a sound executive bet.

So what's gone wrong, you may well ask? I can only hazard a speculative guess. There is the danger of course that case study evaluators will go native. Close and continuous contact with the objects of policy inevitably involves the risk of contamination by their values, interests, problems and perspectives. Evaluators can and do become double agents, emissaries of both sides. In fact the risk is much greater than this, the consequence far more serious. We case study evaluators enter into the lives of the program beneficiaries to such an extent that we are able to construct vindicative portrayals of how they discharge their program responsibilities. This is not only a source of potential embarrassment to executives seeking a financial terminus to investments that have served their purpose, it contrasts with our inability to produce equally vindicative accounts of the sponsors, to whose lives we have strictly limited access. The unfortunate result of this differential access is that case study evaluations have a tendency to raise disturbing questions about the adequacy of the policy formulation and policy management processes.

Clearly we must do something about this if we are to regain the confidence of our executive sponsors, and fortunately the solution of the problem is simple and straightforward. All we need is parity of access to all the agencies involved in educational investments. Then we can do for the executive what we so successfully do for other program participants, and be confident of remaining high on his shopping list.

So, next time you negotiate a case study evaluation .....

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